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TO

THE SPEEDY SUCCESS OF THE ALLIES

AND

THEIR INTIMATE MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

A. YUSUF ALI

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Nov. 30, 1916

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FOREWORD

BY

HIS EXCELLENCY

M. JOVAN M. JOVANOVITCH,

Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of His Majesty the King of Serbia to the Court of St. James's

LEGATION ROYALE DE SERBIE,
195, QUEEN'S GATE, LONDON, S.W.
29th Nov., 1916.

DEAR MR. YUSUF ALI,

I have read with great interest your study on Meštrović and Serbian Sculpture. I thank you for the enlightened and penetrating sympathy with which you have focussed the principal traits of the art and soul of the Serbs.

I have no doubt that your study will

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contribute to a better understanding of the Serbian Nation and its ideals, and will thus help in the realisation of its just aspirations.

Agreéz, Monsieur Yusuf Ali, l'assurance de mes sympathies les meilleures.

Jov. M. Jovanovitch.

MEŠTROVIĆ AND SERBIAN SCULPTURE

ZOLA once defined a work of art in a casual inscription in an album. "Un œuvre d'art," he wrote, "est un coin de la nature vu à travers d'un temperament" — a small bit of nature illuminated through a temperament. This illumination may come through an individual temperament or a national temperament. In the case of the Serbian sculptor, Meštrović, the illumination is both individual and national.

The individual temperament of an artist always counts as an important factor. But sometimes it gives the tone to the whole national temperament. As the first great Serbian sculptor, Meštrović is a pioneer; it is his privi-

lege as a pioneer to stand out as a unique exponent of the national temperament of Serbia.

But what is a "national temperament"? With reference to the Balkans, the term "national" or "nationality" has a wider signification than when it refers to the more settled nations of Europe and America. The best test of Balkan nationality is a living feeling of race consciousness.

Judged by this test, the Southern Slavs form, subject to a qualification on account of differences of religion, a single nationality. They not only include the independent kingdom of Serbia, with the territory acquired in the last Balkan War, but also the independent kingdom of Montenegro and the various Slav communities included in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Chief of these are the Serbs and Croats of Dalmatia (from whom Meštrović is himself sprung) and Croatia, and the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The inhabitants of all these tracts belong to a single race, and speak either an identical language or dialects so closely akin as to form

a single language. But differences of religion constitute a very living force among them, and detract from the complete sense of unity and race consciousness which the far-seeing Serbs have attempted to foster and realise. The Southern Slavs have never been noted as a religious race ; but their religious organisation has been of incalculable value to them in the dark days of their history, and forms a line of cleavage which the Jugo-Slav movement will have to take account of. The Croats have been mainly members of the Latin, as opposed to the Eastern Orthodox Church, and their sympathies (though Serbian) are coloured by a more Western view of the Serbian problem than that held and passionately asserted by the Serbs of independent Serbia. Their civilisation, too, owes much to Venice and Italy, and this brings the Serbian ideal into apparent (but not irreconcilable) conflict with the Italians, who propose to redeem their *Italia Irredenta.*

The half-million pure-blooded Serbian Mohammedans of Bosnia represent a religious

revolt. Their temperament is naturally one which protests against the established order. When they were members of the Roman Church they broke away into Manichæan and other heresies.

The Serbians proper belong mainly to the Eastern Orthodox Church, but they have an independent organisation of their own. Quite early in their history (about the beginning of the thirteenth century) they obtained the concurrence of Byzantium and the Monastery of Mount Athos (the mother seat of the Byzantine Church) to the establishment of a self-governing national Church, which, if it has not been pre-eminent for spiritual gifts, has at least been a rallying centre and a bond of union for the Serbs in the days of their subjection.

Besides religious divisions, there have always been political divisions. In fact, Serbian politics may be defined as a corner of history viewed through a temperament. From the earliest times, when the Southern Slavs migrated from the Carpathians to the Balkans in the seventh century,

their history has been a constant succession of family or political feuds, intermittently lit by flashes of an inner vision of unity and empire. Their position in the Byzantine Empire varied, and depended generally upon their position in the Eastern Church. But they gradually established their independence. Stephan Dushan (1336–1356) made brilliant conquests, and conceived the dream of a Serbian Empire which should include Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and Byzantium under Serbian hegemony. But after his death the Vojvodes (nobles) fought, each for his own hand, until Serbian independence was extinguished in the onrush of the Osmanli Empire from the East. The decisive battle was that of Kossovo (the "Field of Blackbirds") in 1389, in which the Czar Lazar fell with all his chivalry. The whole of the Balkans formed, with brief intervals, for over 400 years afterwards, a part of the Turkish Empire.

Kossovo is the pivot of Serbian history, and the inspiring motive of Serbian art, music and poetry. A cycle of heroic legends has grown

up round Kossovo. Serbian popular poetry already attracted the attention of Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, and Goethe translated the "Ballad of Hassan Aga's Wife's Lament" with great enthusiasm. Sir John Bowring gave a rendering of Serbian popular poetry in 1827, and more recently Mme. E. L. Mijatović and M. Petrovitch have respectively given English readers a fair taste of the cycle of Kossovo and of the hero tales and legends of the Serbians. To the present day it is a common sight in Serbia to see a blind bard with his gusla (national one-stringed violin) wandering about from village to village and singing these hero legends to the accompaniment of the simple rhythm of popular music. The "Blind Gusla-Player" of Meštrović is one of his most characteristic pieces of sculpture: the bard's face is shown with prophetic intensity as possessed of a keener inner vision to compensate for the loss of physical sight.

The conflict of noble against noble already appears in these Kossovo ballads, which, taken

as a whole, read like an epic of hatred between noble and noble. The strong light of heroic daring and valour in Milosh Obilić is contrasted with the jealous pride of birth and the impotent treachery of Vuk Branković. Milosh was the son of a shepherdess, reared on mare's milk. Vuk was jealous of him and hated him, and sowed suspicions of his loyalty in the mind of Czar Lazar. He advised a policy of caution when the challenge of Kossovo came, and is branded and cursed as a "traitor twice in the fight" by the bards. It is Milosh who "flashes up like flame" and suggests that they should die like men rather than "give away our land like women." With two chosen companions as dauntless as himself he goes to the Turkish camp and slays Sultan Murad with his own hand. He is taken prisoner, and eventually, after the defeat of Kossovo, begs to be allowed to lie at the feet of "his own Czar Lazar." Such is the conflict of loyalty and valour against ineptitude and treachery at Kossovo.

From that time to the opening of the nine-

teenth century the field of popular poetry is full of heroes, but after Kossovo they are cast in a different mould. They do deeds of great individual heroism, and sometimes figure in scenes of touching family pathos. But these have no national significance until we come to the weakening of the Turkish grip with the victories of Prince Eugene early in the eighteenth century. Thereafter the national stage of Serbia is filled with the rise of Kara George and his family. In the nineteenth century begins the feud of Obrenović and his family with the house of Kara George. Both these were heroes in their time, and herdsmen of the same breed as the old-time Milosh. The founder of the Obrenović was also a Milosh. The opening of the twentieth century saw the Kara George family re-established, and a new page opened in the heroic history of Serbia, of which only the first few lines have yet been written.

Amid all this hatred, this division, this strife, this shame of subjection, there remained the Serbian spirit of sturdy independence, of self-

reliance, of hardy love of adventure, of chivalrous love of home and country. The ideas were not perhaps very clearly expressed in art, music, or literature. Plastic arts flourished little among the Slavonic people, and the Eastern Church placed a ban on images almost as strict as that of Islam. Painting never went beyond the stage of the Primitives in Byzantium itself, and was almost unknown to the Serb shepherd and peasant highlanders. But popular ballad literature and folk music flourished as it rarely flourishes among more settled communities. A language rich and resonant built up for them a folk literature in intimate touch with their folk music. With no clear-cut mythology comparable to that of Greece or of the Northern Sagas, or of the distant Hindus of a more cultured, if softer, Aryan stock, they peopled their world with heroes from their history—heroes principally of the defeat and disaster of Kossovo. These heroes are mighty men, but melancholy. They brood over wrongs and revenge. They are violent and revel in blood, even like the Vila,

the legendary spirit that loves fighting and slaughter. Their chivalry and protection of the weak take a dark tinge from such scenes of history. The irresistible Ban Strahinya goes and recovers his treacherous wife from the foe. Her father and brothers would have killed her, but he spares her life and removes the stain on his own honour by foiling the rage of the spoiler. Honour is not to be understood in the courtly sense of the soft troubadours, nor love to be celebrated in the persuasive strains of the minstrelsy of France. Woman, in the joint family system of the Zadruga, can never be the Queen of Chivalry that she was in the West. But there is a strong sense of rough-and-ready justice, and a chivalrous impulse for the protection of the weak.

Withal there is a national consciousness that amounts to more than religion. This consciousness can build its dreams both on the past and for the future. In the past was the dream of the great Serbian Empire of Dushan all but realised. It was mighty in its overthrow in the

heroic mould of the men whose deeds were sung nightly in the villages—men who were valorous in defeat and never abandoned the larger hope embodied in the bardic dreams of the future. When the events of the nineteenth century gradually won autonomy for the Balkan States, these dreams were revived. Such dreams necessarily involve a conflict of nationalities, but it is for the artists to interpret them, to invest them with new meaning, to purify them of the lust of bloodshed, and with their magic to gild the strength of Hercules with the radiance of Apollo and the Muses.

Such is the meaning of Meštrović and his Serbian sculpture. The art is not mainly religious ; it is not mainly personal ; it is national. Its whole ideals are bound up with the growth and glory of the dream of a united Serbian nation, including all the fragments and territories at present comprised in other political units. Its aim is not so much to seek beauty or to discover moral grandeur as to express the political ideal of Great Serbia, to which all

individual excellence must minister. And this national ideal does not rest so much on achievement as on the hard grit of its heroes, which must be chiselled out to the form of the goddess of nationhood of the sculptor's dreams.

It is therefore fitting that the central idea of the whole of Meštrović's art should be embodied in the design of the temple to be erected at Kossovo. Kossovo is the starting-point of the nation's legendary heroes. It should be the sacred home of the nation's hopes of the future. It would be frankly a place for the worship of the motherland. The wooden model of the temple was shown by Meštrović in 1912 at Belgrade, and Serbian opinion has endorsed the artist's success in voicing national aspirations. Among the recently published books in English on Serbia is one by M. Petrovitch, of the Serbian Legation in London. It is significant that the author accepts Meštrović as the true interpreter of Serbia's innermost thought.

The general design of the temple is simple but imposing. In front is a lofty gateway with

three passages. The only ornaments are massive bronze figures of lions, horses and eagles—for courage, swiftness, and piercing vision, the three qualities which Serbian tradition dwells upon in Serb heroes. Through the gateway runs a long passage open to the skies and flanked by caryatids and walls. These caryatids are a study in themselves. They are all different types of Serb womanhood in the long night of history. There are those that are lowly, with eyes downcast and weeping for their nation. These carry the burden of their nation on their head, but they are erect, and are, for all their sorrow and suffering, mothers of heroes. There are the more fortunate ones, typifying free Serbia and Montenegro. Then there are intermediately the unredeemed women, Bosnia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slovenia, and the other pieces of Serbia still in subjection. They are sad indeed, but the light of hope is on their brows, and they support the edifice of a regenerated Serbia as much as Old and New Serbia, now united.

Parallel to the central passage, but screened from it by walls, run two roofed cloisters, with massive Doric pillars. These are in complete harmony with the prevailing sentiment — the type of strength combined with simplicity. At the end of the passage, nearest the shrine, is a lofty pyramidal tower in six stages, ornamented by colossal winged figures. The central mass of the temple is octagonal, looking to the eight principal points of the compass. Unity is given to the whole by the central octagonal dome. The open cloisters round the temple are reached by spacious steps on three sides, leading through open cloisters to the temple itself. The three smaller domes are replicas of the large central dome, and serve to balance the structure of the dome, the tower, and the gateway.

Such is the general architecture of the temple, which is interpreted and analysed in detail by the sculpture. Here we are at once in the region of the heroic and the colossal. Take that great Sphinx which holds in its silent lips the symbol of the destinies of Serbia. That

colossal bronze winged female figure surmounting a pylon of the Serbian Pavilion at the Rome Exhibition of 1911, which won a European fame for Meštrović, then only in his twenty-ninth year, stamps the mark of vigorous originality on his work. Both the pose and the figure and the poise of the wings break away from conventional standards. There is a faint flavour of Egyptian art, but it might equally be a reminiscence of Chaldaea. Meštrović himself has told me that he is not conscious of any Egyptian influence on his work. We can see that both classical and modern influences, if they had modified his Slav originality, would have left the world the poorer of his simple striving impulse, his directness and symbolism. If they require a little familiarity before we can understand them, they fully repay the trouble of understanding them. Even the influence of Vienna, that pseudo-centre of modern European art, left Meštrović untouched, though his life as a Dalmatian necessarily came into contact with powerful Viennese influences.

We noted directness as one of Meštrović's characteristics; as in Russian literature, that directness is combined with great complexity. The allegory of the bronze female figure is not complete in itself. There is a secondary allegory in the torso of Milosh Obilić held in her right hand. It is a mere torso, with no head, a type of Serbia in the making. The face of the female figure is worked with great elaboration. The indication is rather of wrath than of power, rather of tragedy than of strength. Thus do the secondary effects, almost unconsciously, interweave, with the primary effects, a story of great artistic complexity.

We have already referred to this hero, Milosh Obilić, in speaking of the battle of Kossovo. His colossal head in plaster and the companion colossal torso were designed for the central hall of the temple to typify Serbian history in epitome. He represents not only Serbia's past for five centuries, but Serbia's future now being hammered out by the blows of opposing forces in the most gigantic conflict in history. In

Serbian history itself Milosh represents the forward democratic spirit, as opposed to any aristocratic tendencies of tradition. In this sense the battle of Kossovo itself is not an event of the past to Serbia, but speaks as a real living force. Round Kossovo have clung the thoughts of Serbia in the last two Serbian wars, even as geographically Kossovo is on the watershed, and feeds impartially the rivers of the Danube in the north and those of the Gulf of Salonika in the south.*

The beautiful white marble torso of Strahinya is Meštrović's idealisation of manly beauty. But notice at once his departure from any classical tradition. The Greek conception of Apollo aimed at grace and agility. Perhaps the Greek figure was less muscular than the best developed modern figure. In any case that does not interest Meštrović. His chief aim is realistic and national. He wants to see the Dalmatian peasant's figure idealised, as all art must idealise,

* See Miss M. I. Newbiggin's *Geographical Aspect of Balkan Problems.*

but idealised with a stern respect for nature and facts. Weight and muscle are given due prominence, as they needs must be in the tense muscles of a Slav wrestler stripped for the fray. The story of Strahinya Ban and his chivalry has already been referred to.

The romance of Marko covers an enormous field of Serbian legend. Meštrović has made two studies of him, viz., a head and a colossal equestrian statue. Historically Marko was a vassal of the Sultan, and loyally aided the Turks in their campaigns.* But in legend and poetry he is a hero of superhuman strength, and is still living. He was the embodiment of a perfect knight. His eyes are, in the language of the poet, "bright and fierce as those of a hungry wolf." He was strong of arm and fleet of foot, at once bold and loyal, generous to foes and chivalrous to women. He had a wonderful piebald horse named Sharatz, who shared in all the glories of his adventures.

* See Petrovitch: *Hero Tales and Legends of the Serbians*, p. 6.

Sharatz knew the moment for kneeling down to save his master from his adversary's lance, and the moment for rearing and charging his adversary's horse with his forefeet. His nostrils exhaled a quivering blue flame, and Marko on Sharatz was "a dragon mounted upon a dragon." Marko loved animals, and wandered for adventures through many lands, and the stories of his valour are almost as well known in Bulgaria as they are in Serbia. He was supposed to have fought in the body with the Serbians in the last Balkan wars. His real presence (it is asserted) was believed in by thousands in the Serbian army, and not merely imagined as an inspiring vision like that of the Angels of Mons, who were supposed to have been seen by British soldiers in the first autumn of the war.

So far we have discussed purely national subjects. When we pass on to consider the religious subjects, we find the same national characteristics. The Dalmatian's and the Serb's mental attitude towards the great subjects of religious art is different from that of his more

Western Allies. The Serb's intense nationalism, his haunting sense of history and tragedy, is carried into the Biblical figures of Meštrović. The Serbian sculptor's elongated bronze head of John the Baptist may be contrasted with the famous John the Baptist of Rodin. In Rodin's Baptist there is ruggedness and prophecy, and a criticism of life; but there is humility, righteousness, and the hope of Him who is to perfect life and crown it with glory. In Meštrović's Baptist the struggle and the agony are predominant: the vision of the Cross blots out all else. In both cases you can almost hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness; but Meštrović's Baptist is in despair because of the fruitless cry, and the brow, eyes, mouth and lips almost miss the sweet promise of the Resurrection.

The bronze relief of Salomé forms a companion work of art, and completes the picture. The triumph of the dancer, with the Baptist's head on the charger, is almost described as final. It is a veritable frenzy of intensity. The

poise of the head and the mouth combine, with the energy of the dance and the muscular tension of the arms, to visualise a scene of malevolent passion transcending humanity. How weak, beside such a presentment, appears the tinted bust of Salomé by Max Klinger in the Leipzig Museum!

This sense of pessimism and uncompromising horror in sacred art is carried to the central figure in the Supreme Tragedy. Examine Meštrović's plaster Crucifixion, and his wooden plaque in relief, the Deposition from the Cross. In the Western Churches the Christ is a figure of beauty and power. Even in His agony and His sufferings the beauty and the power are always predominant. Here in Meštrović there is agony and suffering unrelieved. The agony and suffering *constitute* the power, and physical privation *is* the picture of moral beauty and perfection. This is the Byzantine tradition; indeed, it is the primitive tradition, refined away by the neo-pagan or classical worship of beauty in the Renaissance.

There are six figures in the Deposition from the Cross. The Master is still in intense agony. The Divine calm of conquest over death and suffering would be foreign to the atmosphere of the piece, and out of keeping with the feelings and attitude of the five worshippers. To Mary, the Mother, there is no more light, but all is extinguished in utter darkness. To Mary Magdalene a devout kiss of the hand that is dead is as the bitterness of supreme sorrow. The third Mary can but wring her hands and tear her hair. The two male figures find themselves absolutely dazed with the shock of the tragedy. The intense realisation of bitterness and suffering is unrelieved by any softer touch.

When we come to modern and individual subjects, we find less need of interpretation than in the national and religious subjects. The individual genius is still there: Meštrović would not be himself if he did not attempt to pierce straight through the veil to the truth he is struggling to express. His plaster portrait of Rodin is one that could have been done by no

other hand. The attitude of the figure is wholly original. Heroic genius is shown in the study of the hands, which may be compared with the separate study of a hand in bronze, a masterpiece in itself. But it is on Rodin's face that a loving disciple has lavished all his strength, all his humour, all his veneration for his great master. You can see here the spirit of old France rejuvenated; titanic labour, which in art is the very light and enjoyment of life; classical art lending a hand to the new art in the Near Eastern horizon; and the strength of purpose and the clearness of vision that are to triumph over all obstacles.

Three portraits of women give a glimpse of the domestic ideals in the sculptor's mind, interpreting again the national ideals. In his mother's portrait Meštrović has reproduced the legend of Prince Marko's love for his mother. Meštrović also modelled a Pietà in bronze relief: the face in the Pietà seems to have been studied from his mother's face. There is not joy, perhaps, but there is calmness, the gift of the Woman

and Mother facing the turmoil of life; there is earnestness, less a spur to action than a transmuter of action into piety; and there is the grace which must conquer sadness and sorrow.

The sculptor has also given portraits of his wife and of his sister. The wife brings us out at once from the atmosphere of the past and its dreams into the actualities of to-day. There is pride and joy in life and youth, and just the least coquettish poise of the head has not been disdained. The sister is the Dalmatian peasant girl personified; the keynotes are simplicity and directness, and an artistic curiosity into the future. Here is an unwritten page of a life yet to be unfolded. The three women typify the Past, the Present and the Future.

We have taken a rapid survey of Serbian national characteristics and national history in order to understand the art of Meštrović. We have seen that his heroes and his ideals have a direct bearing on the Balkan movement of to-day. The exhibition of his sculpture in

London has brought home to the English people the intense patriotism and national feeling of the Southern Slavs. Following on the Rodin exhibition, it has cemented the highest thought of the Allied nations by means of their art. The gift of Rodin's work to the British nation, and a similar gift of one of Meštrović's masterpieces, have indicated the response which British sympathy and action have stimulated in the Allied minds. Such results fully justify the exhibition of these sculptures in a national collection like the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, even in the case of so young an artist as Meštrović. His own personality—modest and unassuming, calm and determined—has, by actual contact with the best minds of England, done more towards a true understanding of Slav and Balkan character than more direct modes of exposition could have done. Such is the power of art; while it lays emphasis on national characteristics, its truth illuminates dark places and serves to bring nations together.

And what is Meštrović's message to the

great nation across the Atlantic? It is straight and direct—that the pride of a nation in peace is no armour in the day of war. Driven from its territory, homeless and wandering, the Serbian nation still lives, because its tragic spirit is being refined in the fire of battle.

NOTE.—The name of Meštrović has been spelt as he spells it, but in other Serbian names the popular Western orthography has been followed for the convenience of the general reader. The writer would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance he has received from M. Bogdan Popovitch, who has been good enough to read over the proofs and to make valuable suggestions.

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